

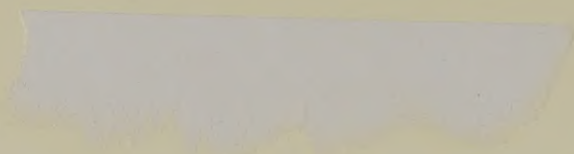


HOUSE OF LORDS

Science and Technology Committee

5th Report of Session 2005–06

Annual Report for 2005



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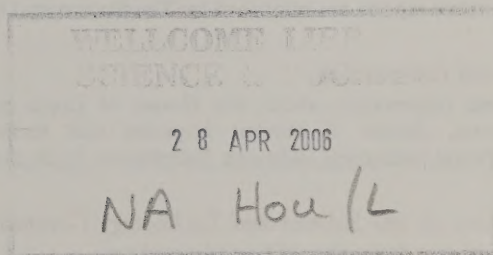
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Science and Technology Committee

The Science and Technology Committee is appointed by the House of Lords in each session “to consider science and technology”.

Current Membership

The Members of the Science and Technology Committee are:

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Baroness Finlay of Llandaff
Lord Howie of Troon
Lord Mitchell
Lord Patel
Lord Paul
Baroness Perry of Southwark
Baroness Platt of Writtle
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Information about the Science and Technology Committee, including details of current inquiries, can be found on the internet at <http://www.parliament.uk/hlscience/>. Committee publications, including reports, press notices, transcripts of evidence and government responses to reports, can be found at the same address.

Committee reports are published by The Stationery Office by Order of the House.

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General information about the House of Lords and its Committees, including guidance to witnesses, details of current inquiries and forthcoming meetings is on the internet at: http://www.parliament.uk/about_lords/about_lords.cfm.

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Annual Report for 2005

REPORT

Introduction

1. This is the first Annual Report of the House of Lords Science and Technology Committee. Our object in making an Annual Report is three-fold:
 - To make available to Members of the House and the public the principles which guide our work, along with a summary of our activities over the preceding calendar year;
 - To review the impact of the Committee's work, including recent developments relevant to Reports that we have made in previous years;
 - To comment on other matters relevant to the work of the Committee, such as the quality and timeliness of Government responses, debates, and so on.

The role and working methods of the Committee

2. The Committee was first appointed by the House of Lords in 1979 to "consider science and technology". One of the Committee's first acts in 1980 was to adopt an "*Aide-Mémoire on the Role of the Committee*", setting out in more detail the Committee's functions. This *aide-mémoire* was reviewed and reaffirmed in 1990 shortly before our then Chairman, Lord Flowers, gave evidence to the Select Committee on Committee Work of the House (the Jellicoe Committee). It is reprinted in the Appendix.
3. Taking the *aide-mémoire* as a starting-point, but incorporating principles that have been less formally endorsed by the Committee in recent years, we have also prepared a shorter Summary of the Role of the Committee, which is given in Box 1. The Summary crystallises the principles by which we decide our programme of work and assess our performance.

BOX 1

Summary of the Role of the Committee

The Committee is appointed to consider science and technology and to report to the House on matters within this field with which Parliament ought to be concerned.

Such matters include areas where Parliament itself has a role; where Government or statutory bodies are or should be involved; or where there is a strong public interest or concern.

In choosing subjects the Committee pays special attention to the applications of science and technology, in order to identify issues likely to be of political significance. It also seeks to—

- Identify subjects where it can make timely and useful recommendations;
- Achieve a balanced work programme, for instance by combining biological or medical subjects with engineering or technology;
- Identify subjects that involve a range of Government Departments or other agencies and bodies;
- Avoid duplication with the work of other bodies.

4. It will be clear from the Summary that the Committee has no specific scrutiny role with regard to the Office of Science and Technology. Such scrutiny, along with the more general examination of Government expenditure on science and technology, is the responsibility of the House of Commons Select Committee on Science and Technology, and we do not seek to duplicate their work.
5. Most inquiries are undertaken by specially appointed sub-committees, of which there are normally two in existence at any one time. Typically the Select Committee chooses a topic for investigation and appoints a sub-committee, selecting a Chairman and most of the members from among its own membership. The sub-committee itself then has the power to co-opt any Member of the House to serve for the duration of the inquiry. The sub-committee also appoints a Specialist Adviser. Inquiries normally take six to twelve months, and once the inquiry is complete the sub-committee reports back to the Select Committee and is dissolved.
6. Occasionally the Select Committee decides to undertake a shorter inquiry itself, normally to follow up an earlier sub-committee inquiry. Thus in 2004 we prepared a short report on *Radioactive Waste Management* (debated in January 2005), which followed up our 1999 Report *Nuclear Waste Management*; in 2005 we conducted a rather more detailed inquiry into *Pandemic Influenza*, following up our 2003 Report *Fighting Infection*.
7. The Committee's power of co-option means that 27 Members of the House participated directly in the work of either the Select Committee or its sub-committees over the year.
8. The Select Committee and its sub-committees are in addition supported by a staff of five: two Clerks (one of whom clerks both the Select Committee and a sub-committee); one Committee Specialist; and two Secretarial Administrators. Temporary Specialist Advisers are appointed to support particular inquiries.

Summary of activity in 2005

9. During 2005 the Select Committee and its sub-committees held 46 meetings, 24 of these in public; they also made seven visits, three of which were to destinations overseas, four within the United Kingdom. A summary of meetings, visits, and outcomes, is given in Table 1 (opposite).
10. The Committee published five Reports in 2005. Of the three major Reports two, *Ageing: Scientific Aspects* and *Energy Efficiency*, both published in July, were the products of detailed sub-committee inquiries; the third, *Pandemic Influenza*, published in December, was the result of a short inquiry by the Select Committee itself. The other two Reports contained Government Responses to earlier Reports.
11. In the course of 2005 three debates were held on the floor of the House on Reports published in 2004: *Radioactive Waste Management* (debated 12 January¹); *Science and Treaties* (debated 3 February²); and *Renewable Energy: Practicalities* (debated 23 June³).

¹ HL Deb, cols. 323-352.

² HL Deb, cols 450-476.

³ HL Deb, cols. 1787-1836.

TABLE 1
Summary of Activity in 2005

Committee/ Subject	Meetings (in public)	Visits	Status of inquiry	Debate/ Government Response
Select Committee (including inquiry on pandemic influenza)	19 (6)	0	Report published December 2005	Debate on 20 January 2006
Sub-Committee I				
Ageing: Scientific Aspects	10 (6)	1 (Washington, DC)	Report published July 2005	Response received November 2005; Debate to follow in 2006
Water Management	8 (6)	1 (Yorkshire)	Report due in early summer 2006	
Sub-Committee II				
Energy Efficiency	9 (6)	5 (Germany; Sweden; Knightsbridge; Leicester; Durham)	Report published July 2005	Response received October 2005; Debate to follow in 2006

12. We comment in more detail on individual inquiries below, taking them in chronological order.

Sub-Committee II: Energy Efficiency

13. Our inquiry into energy efficiency was launched in mid-2004, with the Report appearing on 15 July 2005. It was our second inquiry, following our 2004 Report *Renewable Energy: Practicalities*, to focus on the Government's 2003 Energy White Paper, which set out their strategy for achieving secure, low-carbon energy supplies.
14. The inquiry revealed widespread confusion at the heart of Government policy. We discovered little co-ordination between Departments, notably between the Department of Trade and Industry, which is responsible for the electricity generating industry, and the Department of Environment, Food and Rural Affairs (Defra), which is responsible for energy efficiency (and thus end use of electricity), as well as for parts of the generating industry itself (such as biomass or Combined Heat and Power). The delivery of policy was fragmented between Departments, agencies and other Non-Departmental Public Bodies. We were even concerned that fundamental data underpinning the Government's policies on energy efficiency—the measurement of the impact of energy efficiency upon absolute energy consumption, and the presentation of this impact in terms of carbon emissions—were muddled and obscure.
15. Our Report argued for greater clarity and simplicity; underlying many of our recommendations was a belief that all energy consumers should have access to good quality information about their energy consumption, and its economic and environmental impacts, in order that they could make sensible decisions about how to use less energy.

16. In light of the Energy Review taking place in the first half of 2006 it is perhaps not surprising that our Report failed to elicit a constructive response from the Government. Nevertheless, the fact that the response to a large extent simply described at length existing policies, initiatives and instruments, without appearing to grasp the strategic vision underlying our Report, was extremely disappointing. We have therefore invited the Energy Minister, Malcolm Wicks MP, who is chairing the Energy Review, to give evidence to us on 29 March, and we propose to use this opportunity to seek assurances that our two recent Reports on energy policy are indeed being taken fully into account in the Review.

Sub-Committee I: Ageing: Scientific Aspects

17. Our inquiry into the scientific aspects of ageing, chaired by Lord Sutherland of Houndwood, ran in parallel with our inquiry into energy efficiency, concluding with the publication of our Report on 21 July 2005. We wished to see how scientific advances might throw further light on the biological processes of ageing, and how the direction and pace of research might be modified to enable older people increasingly to enjoy higher standards of health and a better quality of life.
18. We soon discovered that, while life expectancy was increasing at an almost exponential rate, healthy life expectancy was not only lagging behind, but increasing more slowly. The major recent scientific advances in the treatment of the diseases primarily affecting older people were not being put to best use, so that the years of ill-health in the closing years of life, far from diminishing, were actually increasing. We recommended ways in which the large sums invested in the National Health Service might be put to better use in the prevention of diseases rather than in expensive attempts to cure them.
19. The funds expended on scientific research into ageing matters were disappointing, but worse still was the co-ordination of such research. None of the bodies set up by the research councils over recent years had the powers, the infrastructure or, seemingly, the drive needed to ensure that funds were directed where research was most needed, or that research projects did not overlap. It seemed to us that a new body with the necessary leadership, powers and funds could, with only modest expenditure, greatly improve the direction of ageing-related research.
20. Other measures to improve the quality of life of older people are only in part the responsibility of Government. We were disturbed to see how little industry focuses on products and services specifically aimed at older people, despite the rapid growth of this group and its increasing affluence. Industry itself could only benefit from a less blinkered approach—as would older people.
21. The Government's response to our Report, received in November, was extremely disappointing. It failed either to engage with the strategic vision underlying our Report or with the detail of our recommendations. For instance, we recommended that scanners for strokes should be placed in accident and emergency departments. A small investment could greatly improve the chances of healthy survival of stroke patients at a time when the brain is rapidly dying.
22. The substance of our recommendation is incontestable, and was subsequently supported in every particular by a report from the National

Audit Office (NAO). The NAO argued that “scanning patients immediately is the most cost-effective strategy”, and noted that “only 22 percent of patients in the Sentinel Audit received a scan on the same day as their stroke. Most waited two or more days. For patients who were registered as requiring an urgent CT scan (within 30 minutes) only 30 percent actually got the scan on the same day ... This means that scans for stroke patients are being delayed, even though ‘time lost is brain lost’.”⁴

23. In response the Government made no commitment at all. Instead they told us that the Department of Health has set up a “Stroke Strategy Group”. This group “has been developing work mapping the ideal patient care pathways for transient ischaemic attack and stroke. It is now working through the implementation challenges for the NHS”. In a matter as critical as this, we would like to see rapid action, not empty words.
24. We do not intend to let these important recommendations slip into oblivion. Therefore we decided, before publishing a follow-up report or securing a debate on the floor of the House, to send the Government response to several of the witnesses to our original inquiry, with an invitation to comment. In light of their answers we shall consider the most appropriate next steps.

Select Committee: Pandemic Influenza

25. In 2003 we published *Fighting Infection*, a wide-ranging analysis of infectious disease services. We drew attention to the need for improvement in collaboration between departments, organisations and health professionals. We also identified the prospect of future influenza pandemics as one of the major threats to the health of the population, and drew attention to both strengths and weaknesses in the United Kingdom’s preparations for this eventuality. In light of the spread of the H5N1 strain of avian influenza in south east Asia since 2003, we decided in June 2005 to undertake a short follow-up inquiry looking in more detail at the Government’s preparations for a possible influenza pandemic.
26. In the event, at the same time as we held our first public meetings in this inquiry, in October, the spread of the avian H5N1 virus across Asia, and the appearance of the first cases in Europe, underlined the seriousness and urgency of the threat. Although we stuck to a tight timescale, holding our last public meeting on 1 November and publishing our Report on 16 December, we were nevertheless able to hear from an impressive range of witnesses, including the Health Protection Agency, health professionals, manufacturers of antiviral drugs and vaccines, and representatives of the emergency services, business, and the United Nations and its agencies.
27. Our Report, while acknowledging that the United Kingdom is relatively well prepared for a possible pandemic, identified a lack of strong cross-departmental leadership within Government. We also identified a number of specific areas where more could be done, particularly—
 - supporting the efforts of UN agencies and the World Bank to prevent a pandemic;

⁴ National Audit Office, Report by the Comptroller and Auditor General, *Reducing Brain Damage: Faster access to better stroke care* (November 2005, HC 452), p. 22.

- clarifying policy on the use of anti-viral drugs;
 - issuing detailed guidance to health professionals;
 - investing in research into new methods of vaccine production;
 - providing advice to the private sector on pandemic preparedness;
 - giving advance clearance and guaranteed funding to research projects in the event of a pandemic.
28. The Report was launched at a press conference held on 15 December, and generated considerable publicity in the broadcast and print media. The same day as our Report appeared, the Government announced the establishment of a new Cabinet Committee, chaired by the Secretary of State for Health, to co-ordinate Government planning. Since publication influenza has remained in the public eye, with human cases and deaths confirmed in Turkey.
29. In light of the urgent need for stronger national and international action on pandemic influenza, we secured a debate on the floor of the House on 20 January 2006, ahead of the publication of the Government's response. We shall continue to monitor the situation, and expect to review progress in the near future.⁵

Sub-Committee I: Water Management

30. In July 2005 we launched a new inquiry into water management. Chaired by the Earl of Selborne, the inquiry comes at a time of growing pressure upon water resources in the south and east of England, driven primarily by population growth, lifestyle changes and climate change. At the same time, an increasing number of challenging Directives on water-related issues are emanating from Europe, led by the Water Framework Directive.
31. With the exception of flooding and fluoridation, the inquiry is looking at all significant aspects of water management, including the regulatory system, water resources, demand management, environmental impacts, research and development, consumer issues and the role of EU Directives. We expect to report by the middle of 2006, and a fuller account of the inquiry and its outcome will be included in next year's Annual Report.

Sub-Committee II: Science and Heritage

32. Late in the year we decided to set up a sub-committee, chaired by Baroness Sharp of Guildford, to look at Science and Heritage. The Call for Evidence was issued in December, and the inquiry is expected to conclude in June or July 2006.

The impact of the Committee's work

33. Our primary task is to report to the House on matters of interest to Parliament, and in so doing to inform and influence debate within the House. There is no clear measure of success or failure, but we are gratified that 38 speakers took part in the three debates mentioned above, including no fewer than 18 speakers who took part in the debate on renewable energy, despite the fact that it took place on a Thursday afternoon.

⁵ The Government's response was published as a Command Paper on 16 February (Cm 6738).

34. We also note that past reports of the Committee continue to influence wider debate in the House. For instance, in December the implementation of recommendations contained in our 2000 Report *Air Travel and Health*⁶ was the subject of detailed debate in the Grand Committee considering the Civil Aviation Bill.⁷
35. It is still more difficult to measure impact upon the wider world, whether on Government, the media or public opinion. Such impact may be manifested in the acceptance of specific recommendations by Government, or, more nebulously, in press coverage and the stimulation of wider public debate.
36. Government responses are the first formal, tangible expression of the impact of our work upon Government thinking. However, while such responses are important, in reality the impact of our Reports may be felt less directly, and over much longer periods. For instance, our Report on *Science and Society*,⁸ published in 2000, continues to influence attempts to encourage public understanding of and engagement with science in many areas of public policy. At the same time one needs to differentiate between the specific impact of the Committee's work and that of other events in the wider world (though by avoiding duplication with the work of other bodies we seek to keep this effect to a minimum).
37. We discuss Government responses separately below. Here we merely give two examples of impact from 2005, one immediate, the other longer-term.

Radioactive Waste Management

38. Our report on *Radioactive Waste Management*, published in December 2004, had wide coverage in the broadcast and print media, and, as the Royal Society have observed, many of our recommendations, though not initially accepted by the Government, have in effect come to pass in the course of the year.⁹
39. Our principal concern was that the body charged with recommending the best means of disposing of radioactive waste, the Committee on Radioactive Waste Management (CoRWM), lacked sufficient scientific and technical expertise to give its recommendations authority. Subsequently the Chief Scientist at the Department of Environment, Food and Rural Affairs (Defra), Howard Dalton, responded to our concerns by appointing an expert panel to support CoRWM. CoRWM itself appointed an internal Quality Assurance Working Group, which will include three external experts, including nominees from the Royal Society and the Royal Academy of Engineering.
40. We are encouraged that CoRWM and Defra are now placing greater emphasis on the importance of high quality scientific and technological input into decisions on radioactive waste management—an impression confirmed at a private discussion with members of CoRWM on 23 November, organised jointly with the House of Commons Environment, Food and Rural Affairs Committee. We look forward to revisiting these issues after CoRWM has reported in July 2006.

⁶ 5th Report, Session 1999-2000 (HL Paper 121).

⁷ HL Deb., 8 December 2005, cols. GC 129-140.

⁸ 3rd Report, Session 1999-2000 (HL Paper 38).

⁹ See the Report by the Royal Society, published 9 January 2006, *The long-term management of radioactive waste: the work of the Committee on Radioactive Waste Management (CoRWM)*, paragraph 2.5.

Complementary and Alternative Medicine

41. Our report on *Complementary and Alternative Medicine* appeared as far back as November 2000. In it we recommended that practitioners of acupuncture and herbal medicine be subject to statutory regulation. Although the Government accepted this recommendation at the time, it was not until March 2004 that they launched a consultation on specific proposals. The results of the consultation were published in February 2005, and revealed strong support for the principle of statutory regulation. The Government announced that they would publish draft legislation (an Order under section 60 of the Health Act 1999) in autumn/winter 2005. Although we have yet to see any draft legislation, we look forward to rapid implementation of our original recommendation in the course of 2006.

Other observations: Government responses

42. We have already noted that Government responses reveal only a small part of the overall impact of our work. Nevertheless, as the first formal, tangible expression of its impact on Government thinking, it is essential for the credibility of parliamentary scrutiny that they should be of high quality. We therefore take this opportunity to comment on recent problems.
43. One welcome development has been a reduction in the time taken to prepare responses. In the course of 2005 our Chairman, along with the Chairmen of the Constitution and Economic Affairs Committees, wrote to the Leader of the House to propose that the six-month deadline for Government responses be brought more closely into line with the two-month deadline applying to House of Commons Select Committees. We are delighted that the Leader was able to persuade Departments to agree that henceforth the deadline should be two months—with the proviso that Departments may negotiate extensions in the case of particularly long or complex Reports.
44. However, although this reduction in the time allowed for responses is welcome, their poor quality is a matter of considerable concern. Until the last few years responses were commonly published by the Government and presented to Parliament as Command Papers; more recently, possibly for reasons of economy, Departments have taken to submitting responses as written memoranda, and correspondingly less care seems to be taken over either form or content.
45. Concern over their poor quality is not confined to this Committee. Our sister Committee in the House of Commons commented in its 2004 Annual Report on the “tendency for Government responses to restate existing policy and to set out those measures already being taken rather than to focus on new measures and developments ... Such responses give the impression of stagnation in Government policy-making.”¹⁰
46. This mirrors our own experience: Government responses in 2005 were largely taken up with lengthy restatements of existing policy (in most cases already familiar to the Committee), and failed to engage with the Committee’s Reports at either a strategic level or at the level of specific recommendations.

¹⁰ House of Commons Science and Technology Committee, 2nd Report, 2004-05 (HC Paper 199), p. 19.

47. We are not in a position to offer an explanation, though it is clear that our Reports, affecting as they often do the interests of several departments, create particular difficulties for the Government in co-ordinating a response. This should not, however, be an excuse for poor quality work: in addressing cross-departmental issues we deliberately seek to stimulate joined-up thinking across Government, and we expect Government to respond accordingly.
48. The worst response received in 2005 was to our July 2004 Report *Renewable Energy: Practicalities*. Although the response (prepared under the old six-month deadline) was issued in December 2004, the Department's failure to alert the Clerk meant that we did not actually receive it until mid-January. Its quality was so inadequate that we arranged a private meeting with the then Energy Minister, Mike O'Brien MP, in March, at which we had a frank discussion of our concerns. The result was the preparation of a revised response, which finally reached us (following the General Election) in June, just before the Report was debated. Although a marked improvement, it was unacceptable that it took almost twelve months from publication of our Report to receipt of an adequate response.
49. The response to our Report *Science and Treaties*, originally published in June 2004, initially appeared to be rather better. When we published the response in January 2005,¹¹ we noted some disappointing aspects, but welcomed its "generally positive nature", and drew particular attention to the Government's commitment to take account of a number of our recommendations when reviewing the Chief Scientific Adviser's Guidelines 2000. In particular, the Government stated that the proper application of the precautionary principle would be "incorporated into Guidelines 2000".¹²
50. It was therefore extremely disappointing to discover, when the revised Guidelines appeared in late 2005, that none of our recommendations regarding the precautionary principle, or the presentation of risk to the public, appeared to have been taken into account. Our Chairman tabled a number of questions for written answer early in 2006 to seek further explanation from the Government, and in response the Minister, Lord Sainsbury of Turville, noted that the Guidelines contain "a cross-reference to the Government's *Managing risks to the public: appraisal guidance* ... where the 'precautionary principle' appears as an annexe".¹³ This latter document is mentioned in the Guidelines merely as one of a series of "useful references", so the likelihood of any user of the Guidelines actually unearthing guidance on the precautionary principle appears small.
51. It is deplorable that the Government, having accepted Select Committee recommendations, appear subsequently to have failed to fulfil their commitments. We shall if necessary pursue this matter further as the year progresses.
52. The Government's responses to our major reports on *Ageing: Scientific Aspects* and *Energy Efficiency*, though they emerged more rapidly, were little better, failing to engage either with the strategic thinking underlying our Reports or with individual recommendations. We have outlined our actions with regard to these responses above.

¹¹ *Science and Treaties: follow-up*, 1st Report, Session 2004-05, HL Paper 32.

¹² *Ibid.*, p 15.

¹³ HL Deb., 24 January 2006, col. WA 164.

53. In conclusion, the poor standard of recent Government responses throws into question the seriousness with which Departments take Parliamentary, and specifically Select Committee, scrutiny. We call on the Cabinet Office to review its guidance¹⁴ to Departments regarding responses, with a view to impressing upon them the importance of ensuring that there is more considered and higher-level input into such responses in future.

¹⁴ The “Osmotherley Rules”, which were in fact reviewed in 2005: see http://www.cabinetoffice.gov.uk/propriety_and_ethics/civil_service/osmotherly_rules/index.asp.

APPENDIX 1: AIDE-MÉMOIRE ON THE ROLE OF THE SELECT COMMITTEE ON SCIENCE AND TECHNOLOGY¹⁵

The Committee's terms of reference are to consider Science and Technology.

Within this field, the Committee's function is:

- To carry out inquiries into matters with which Parliament ought to be concerned;
- To report to the House.

Reports can be the result of detailed study or, if need be, they can be made without detailed study in order to recommend a subject of urgent importance for debate.

Subjects for inquiry should concern one or more of the following areas:

- Areas where Parliament can help and stimulate the advancement and application of science and technology in the United Kingdom;
- Aspects of science and technology in which the Government are, or should be, involved;
- The work of the statutory bodies involved in science and technology;
- Areas where the interests of the public and the interests of science and technology may possibly conflict;
- Areas where there is a degree of public concern over issues of science and technology.

In choosing subjects, the Committee will be selective; and they will pay special attention to the applications of science and technology, in order to identify issues likely to be of political significance.

The Committee should not:

- Choose subjects where the scientific or technological aspect is clearly subsidiary to other considerations;
- Choose subjects so wide that they are beyond the Committee's capability in terms of time and resources;
- Act as a channel of generalised information and education on science and technology between Parliament and the public.

The Committee should be prepared to look again at these guidelines in light of experience.

¹⁵ Agreed in 1980; re-affirmed in 1990.



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Session 2001-02

1st Report Managing Radioactive Waste: the Government's consultation
(follow-up to 3rd Report 1998-99)

2nd Report Science in Schools: Government Responses

3rd Report What on Earth? The threat to the science underpinning conservation
(follow-up to 1st Report 1991-92)

Session 2002-03

1st Report Managing Radioactive Waste: Government Response

2nd Report Chips for Everything: Britain's opportunities in a key global market

3rd Report What on Earth? The threat to the science underpinning conservation: The Government's response and the Committee's commentary

4th Report Fighting Infection

5th Report Science and the RDAs: SETting the Regional Agenda

Session 2003-04

1st Report Chips for Everything: follow-up

2nd Report Science and the RDAs: follow-up

3rd Report Science and Treaties

4th Report Renewable Energy: Practicalities

5th Report Radioactive Waste Management *(follow-up to 3rd Report 1998-99 and 1st Report 2001-02)*

Session 2004-05

1st Report Science and Treaties: follow-up

2nd Report Radioactive Waste Management: Government Response

Session 2005-06

1st Report Ageing: Scientific Aspects

2nd Report Energy Efficiency

3rd Report Renewable Energy: Practicalities and Energy Efficiency: Government Responses

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